

# **Mapping Fear and Potentiality in American Cold-War Narratives of Eastern Europe**

**Martyna Bryla, PhD**

**Universidad de Málaga**

Whereas it is usually the Soviet Union that looms large over scholarly discussions of fear and paranoia in the Cold-War America, in this paper I propose to focus instead on the collective image of the satellite nations of Eastern Europe and their cultural and imagological connotations in selected American works written between the 1960s and 1980s. Specifically, I will analyze fiction by John Updike, Joyce Carol Oates, and Philip Roth, all of whom travelled to communist Eastern Europe either officially, as American cultural ambassadors (Updike and Oates), or privately (Roth). As I hope to demonstrate, their literary images of Eastern Europe, understood here as a geopolitical construct and an instance of mental mapping, shape the area into a liminal space of danger and potentiality, catalyzing the fears and desires of their American characters and brining national anxieties of the Cold-War era to the fore. As such, these representations of Eastern Europe under communism provide valuable insights into the American Cold-War imaginary, particularly in its intellectual and creative incarnation. Since most of these works feature intellectuals and artists, the emotions they convey are often concerned with creative processes; fear of inadequacy, failure, and misunderstanding, which are further exacerbated by the socio-political realities of Eastern Europe, including political oppression and the perils of dissidence, but also a number of preconceptions about the world behind the Iron Curtain. In other words, fear acquires different dimensions in these works, encompassing both the political/national and the personal. In order to set the stage for the analysis of the literary material, I will first address the idea of Eastern Europe from geopolitical and imagological perspective, and trace the ways in which it had functioned in the American culture prior to the Cold War, with particular emphasis on the Second World War's impact on the American

hetero-image of the area. I will also examine the political context in which the works under analysis were produced, to establish what bearing it has on the resultant representations of Eastern Europe. Finally, a brief comparative reading of Updike's, Oates's, and Roth's takes on Eastern Europe will be offered, with the aim of foregrounding Eastern Europe's role as a repository of American fears and desires that speak to the socio-political realities of the bipolar world, while simultaneously reflecting specific concerns, interests, and anxieties driving the narratives and their authors.